

# Gertrude E. Rush

Census Enumerator and Legal Pioneer

The U.S. Census Bureau has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to employing women. Ever since 1880, when it started using professional enumerators rather than U.S. marshals, the Census Office had employed women in that role. With the advent of the Hollerith tabulating machine in 1890, women moved into the role of keypunchers. The Census Office began using African-American enumerators in 1870, but many of these enumerators faced harassment and death threats, despite their protected status as government agents. This resulted in the removal of some agents, like Amelia Thomas of Columbus, Georgia, after public unrest. In 1910, the Census Bureau issued guidelines that 2/5 or greater African-American population should have African-American enumerators.



The Des Moines Register (Des Moines, IA); 29 Nov 1999

Gertrude Elzora Durden was born on August 5, 1880, in Navasota, Texas. Gertrude’s father, Frank, was a Baptist minister, who moved his family north to find better and safer opportunities. The family settled in Kansas. They moved frequently as Frank worked at various jobs— including as a coal miner, carpenter, and farmer— while Sarah, his wife, kept house and worked as a dishwasher. After completing her high school education, Gertrude taught primary school and wrote hymns as well as plays such as “Sermon on the Mount” and “Black Girl’s Burden.” In 1907, she married Howard University-educated lawyer James Buchanan Rush and began studying law while working at his law office.

### Rush Family 1910 Census



Gertrude enumerated her own household first and listed her occupation as “playwright.”

cents per name), at a time when average weekly pay was \$6. In Iowa, the biggest problems with the decennial tabulation took place in Des Moines, and centered around a small handful of people who were reticent to answer any census questions, regardless of who posed them. In reaction to the appointment of “colored” census takers, the Des Moines *Bystander* congratulated the enumerators and hailed them as respected citizens.

Mr. H. W. Hughes and Mrs. Gertrude Rush are the only colored census enumerators that passed the examination and are appointed by the district enumerator Mr. Culbertson of Knoxville. We congratulate those parties, they are both highly respected citizens. Mrs. Rush is Atty. J. B. Rush's wife.

The Bystander (Des Moines, IA); 8 Apr 1910



Photo from *Notable Black American Women, Book 2* (by Jessie C. Smith)

Gertrude earned her B.A. from Des Moines College in 1914 and then completed her third year of school through a correspondence program at La Salle Extension University in Chicago. In 1918, she became the first black woman to pass the Iowa state bar. She would remain the only African-American woman to do so until 1950. Unfortunately, her husband died shortly before she achieved this honor, but she took over his practice. Over time, she focused her work on women's legal rights in estate cases.

Gertrude was also active in many community groups. Gertrude was president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs

from 1911–1915, and a lifelong member afterwards. She joined the Des Moines Charity League in 1912 and the Public Welfare Bureau in 1919. During this time, she championed representation in public office for black Americans, the appointment of black probation officers, and the creation of the Protection Home for Negro Girls. Gertrude also actively participated in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, as well as the Young Women's Christian Association. She also participated in various suffragist groups, such as the Colored Women's Suffrage Club, various art and political clubs, and a wide variety of Christian organizations, including the Women's Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention.

#### Rush/Durden Family 1930 Census



By 1930, Frank and Sarah Durden were once again living with their daughter.

Perhaps the most important of Gertrude's accomplishments is her success in the field of law. In 1921, she became the first woman to lead a coed state bar association when she became president of the Iowa Colored Bar Association. In 1925, after being denied admission to the American Bar Association, she and four male lawyers founded the Negro Bar Association (now called the National Bar Association). It presently boasts more than 65,000 members, primarily African-American.



*The Pittsburgh Courier* (Pittsburgh, PA); 27 Sep 1952  
Gertrude with the WANBC, 1952

In 1985, the National Bar Association established the Gertrude E. Rush Award, which honors lawyers and judges “based on their leadership in the community and [who] have demonstrated a concern for human and civil rights, and are models for excellence in legal education, along with perseverance in the law, public policy, and social activism.” In 2010, the National Bar Association was one of the groups that worked with the Census Bureau to help ensure accurate counts of historically underrepresented groups. Gertrude passed away in Des Moines on September 5, 1962, but her groundbreaking path starting with the Census Bureau

relied on courage, education and hard work, and left an example many have since been able to follow.